



White Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The American Folk Art Museum (AFAM) received an HRCC Foundations grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities (PW-253795-17) to develop a plan to digitize the Henry Darger Papers in its collection and to create an online portal to give unprecedented access to this significant and unique material. AFAM is home to the single largest public repository on Henry Darger (American, 1892–1973), who is one of the most important self-taught artists to emerge in the twentieth century. This collection was amassed from gifts and purchases beginning in 1995, and currently comprises 35 cubic feet of materials (original manuscripts and collages), in addition to 12 cubic feet of source materials used by the artist, personal papers, religious paraphernalia, and a collection of his books.

This white paper gives AFAM the opportunity to share the results and best practices learned from its planning efforts, which allowed the museum to identify and address the main challenges of implementing an online portal on Darger—notably, (1) making recommendations for conservation, (2) describing technical requirements for future digitization, and (3) developing guidelines for creating online access to the Darger material.

At AFAM, this project has been overseen by the project director Valérie Rousseau, Ph.D., curator of Self-Taught Art & Art Brut, and Mimi Lester, Rapaport archivist and chief research coordinator, with the collaboration of Ann-Marie Reilly, director of collections and exhibition production, and Andreane Balconi, digital asset manager. These efforts were augmented with external consultants, Darger scholars, and specialists at partner institutions with Darger holdings (see [Appendix “Darger Portal Advisory Board”](#)).

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

During the grant period, AFAM has undertaken the following activities:

1. A comprehensive investigation of AFAM's Darger holdings to highlight the connection between the different components of the artist's production and its chronological development over his lifetime

In 2008, archivist Janine St. Germain was among the first to be involved with processing AFAM's Darger collection and creating a database for this material. St. Germain's work uncovered information that provided insight into the creative process of the artist. One of her greatest aims was to ensure that the logic behind the organization of an artist's studio is recognized and preserved. Valuable clues to the workflow of the maker may be understood through preserving the structure of how artists used and accessed their resources. When faced with the life work of someone like Darger who lived reclusively, how exactly does the curator and/or the archivist arrange, describe, and catalog this work in a way that researchers, museumgoers, and the public in general can grasp? What are the best approaches to working with this material in digital form to allow for others to study the artist's process? Following is a general description of the Darger collection:

a) Darger, the visual artist

Darger created two types of artworks: (1) about 100 stand-alone, individual drawings and collages that he stored or hung on the walls of his room (portraits of generals, maps, etc.), and (2) 200 double-sided, large-scale watercolor panoramas that he grouped together in handmade albums. These albums, dated between 1930 and 1972, have been dismantled and dispersed by the first owners to different collections after the artist's death in 1973. AFAM has acquired the only remaining spine of these albums. In 2017, Valérie Rousseau started to rebuild the original sequencing conceived by the artist, with the help of the image fragments visible on the spine edges.

b) Darger, the writer

Darger had an active writing practice (more than 30,000 pages) that seems to have preceded his visual art practice. None of his texts and novels was published during his lifetime. These comprise original handwritten and typed manuscripts—some of which are self-bound. Recent research—both for his texts and artworks—compiled and/or created by AFAM attempted to establish more accurate dates of creation. A chronology of the items has emerged:

- A 15,145-page epic, which echoes events of the American Civil War, titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What Is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*. The story is narrated in 14 volumes, bound and unbound, in typescript volumes and handwritten, possibly written between 1910–1912 (before 1928) and 1915–1917 (before 1938–1939)
- A 8,500-page handwritten manuscript titled *Further Adventures in Chicago: Crazy House* (16 bound and unbound volumes started in 1939) tells the story of the Vivian Girls and their brother Penrod as they encounter a number of murders in a haunted house
- A six-volume weather report journal, dated 1957 to 1967
- A 5,000-page autobiography titled *The History of My Life* (started in 1966)
- A large planning journal in which Darger kept track of thousands of characters, battles, deaths, and events related to the *Realms of the Unreal*

c) Darger's personal archives

This group of documents refers to diaries, creative tools and visual materials (clippings, photographic enlargements), sketches, Darger's personal library, and correspondence.

2. Inventories of AFAM's holdings (content listed in "PROJECT ACTIVITIES," point 1)

- a) Spreadsheet of artworks, exported from TMS Collections database (see appendix "AFAM Darger Artworks")
- b) Finding Aid of Darger Papers (listed in "PROJECT ACTIVITIES," points 1b and 1c), accessible on AFAM's website. The collection was cataloged in FileMaker Pro and converted to ArchivesSpace, where the finding aid is hosted (see appendix "AFAM Darger Finding Aid")
- c) Inventory of all Darger holdings (artworks, manuscripts, source materials, personal archives) at AFAM (Mimi Lester created a complete spreadsheet by exporting the .csv file from the original FileMaker Pro finding aid, created in 2008. All other spreadsheets have been created by manipulating this data.)
- d) Spreadsheet for conservation and digitization process purpose, that includes details about the types of bound and unbound material in AFAM's collection

3. Consultations for conservation and digitization needs

Overall, AFAM's Darger collection is in good to fair condition. The collection is well organized and appropriately housed in climate-controlled, secured stacks in AFAM's facility. The bulk of the collection is processed on the folder level, with a small percentage of material processed to the item level. Some items have been treated previously in preparation for past exhibitions. Access to the collection is restricted, due to conservation reasons. The collection is housed in appropriately sized document boxes. Items that are legal sized or smaller are stored in folders in upright document boxes, whereas oversized materials are stored in folders in flat, oversized boxes. If a consult request is made, the boxes are brought out of storage to the reading room for use.

The fragility and condition of many of these items will require treatment, stabilization, and conservation prior to digitization. The project team discussed options with consultants on how best to proceed with the scanning and digitization, including the establishment of technical requirements necessary for digitization (for example, in some instances, some text in the gutter could not be captured due to the restricted opening of some of the volumes). Representative samples of the 43 bound volumes (commercial bindings, ring binders, and Darger's self-binding) and 8,405 unbound items (including personal records, handwritten and typed manuscripts, source materials as comic strips, coloring books, newspaper clippings, collages, painting fragments, photographic material, and transfer drawings) have been submitted to examination in that context. AFAM's digital asset manager, Andreane Balconi, was brought on to this project to advise on the museum's current capabilities and future needs. The consultants and companies participating in the initial discussions with Mimi Lester and the project staff are Backstage Library Works (see Appendix "Backstage Digitization Questionnaire"), conservator Lisa Conte (initial consult on treatment, see conservation proposal Appendix "Conte & Faivre"), Deborah Wythe (digitization/technical), Tara Hart (digitization/technical), and CCAHA—Conservation Center for Art and Historic Artifacts (conservation and digitization). CCAHA examined each of the 43 volumes and produced appropriate summaries and reports for each volume (see section "ACCOMPLISHMENTS" for details).

4. The Duchamp Research Portal project: an inspirational and comparative model to communicate the scope of Darger's oeuvre

Marcel Duchamp is considered one of the most influential artists of the modern era in that he changed the way that we think about the creation and perception of art. A similarly important case might be made for Henry Darger in that his epic body of work is virtually unprecedented. Similar to the Duchamp Research Portal (NEH #111895) of the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA), which seeks to become the primary online platform on Duchamp, AFAM is looking to partner with other museums with major Darger holdings to eventually contribute to the portal with their resources and collections (see "PROJECT ACTIVITIES," point 5).

Both the Duchamp Research Portal planning grant and white paper have been primary sources in the conceptualization of AFAM's Darger Portal project, providing parallels in terms of content and access. AFAM's staff consistently referred to the intellectual processes developed in these documents and carefully examined the artist portals that it has listed. On April 16, 2018, two AFAM representatives met with Susan K. Anderson, The Martha Hamilton Morris archivist and project director of the Duchamp Research Portal, and Margaret Huang, digital archivist and the coordinator/administrator of the Duchamp Research Portal. They generously welcomed them, answered questions, and provided feedback on the Duchamp Research Portal.

PMA has defined an important model with its Duchamp Research Portal, from which museums of different scales would be interested to learn. It is important that AFAM, which has a smaller operation budget and staff resources, develops a project proportional to its capacity and tries to build on previous experiences shared by PMA and others. PMA reported that it has created a full-time position for a project manager (cf. Margaret Huang) to ensure the vitality, consistency, and maintenance of the portal from conception to completion to regular functioning. PMA also stressed the importance of including partner institutions in the discussions from the start, in order to anticipate the expansions of our platform and potential data merging issues. As the project leader, AFAM would establish the parameters of the portal and cover for its cost without expecting financial contributions from the different partners. PMA emphasized the importance of setting a user-friendly discovery tool. Additional contents (publications, special sections, social media, etc.) can be linked and/or added to the portal subsequently, only if it does not divert from the primary efforts. Copyright issues and agreements must be addressed between various partner institutions to ensure the copyright holder's agreement. PMA also explained why it decided to digitize its documents on-site instead of sending them off-site: ultimately, it was because the process was less expensive. Furthermore, PMA saw increased control in terms of decision making, given the working proximity of digital technicians and portal staff—a conclusion that AFAM will need to explore further, reviewing merits of in-house versus off-site digitization.

5. Constitution of the Darger Portal Advisory Board

The Darger Portal Advisory Board (see [Appendix "Darger Portal Advisory Board"](#)) is composed of representatives from AFAM, Darger scholars, museum and archive professionals, and collaborating organizations. The board's goal is to advise, share ideas, and make recommendations on all aspects of the Darger Portal. The project director and Michael Bonesteel, Darger scholar and former professor at the Art Institute of Chicago, previously met for a working session in July 2017 to compile the main questions to be explored with the panel. Examples of similar artist portals were later investigated, including the following:

- Portal listed in the white paper of the Duchamp Research Portal
- Portal created by the Wellcome Library (see “Digital Collections”): <https://wellcomelibrary.org/collections/digital-collections/mental-healthcare/>
- Portal of the Archives of American Art (once on a page, the tap “More information” could give access to a list of related artworks)
- Portal on André Breton: www.andrebretton.fr

In preparation for the Darger Portal Advisory Board meeting, the project team decided that instead of convening a panel that would be strictly composed of Darger scholars, that experts in the digitization and technical fields would also be invited. On April 23, 2018, this joint panel of humanities and digital specialists convened for a full meeting to strategize on the development of the portal project, focusing on content development, systems, partnerships with other institutions that hold major Darger collections, public access, long-term use, and long-term management. The meeting was recorded.

AFAM’s staff provided an overview of the collection, its history and provenance, updates on recent developments, and current access to the Darger collection to scholars (access is currently restricted due to the fragility of the paper; it is limited to museum professionals and scholars). Mimi Lester talked specifically about cataloging issues, like the different numbering systems that AFAM has used, and other problems encountered with ArchivesSpace and TMS Collections to inventory the Darger collection. All the participants were invited to give a presentation that highlighted their expertise in relation to the Darger Portal project. Some members submitted a report after the meeting.

Following a preliminary survey of other Darger collections (see Appendix “List of Darger Collections”), the project director invited three museums/public institutions with major Darger holdings that have been recognized for their work on Darger (exhibitions, publications, online database) to join the Henry Darger Advisory Board as collaborating partners. The following is a summary of the presentations:

- Intuit–The Center for Intuitive and Outsider Art, Chicago (represented by Alison Amick, chief curator and senior manager of exhibitions), which has the second most important archives on Darger (375 objects, 18 linear feet) after AFAM. In addition to its archival materials, Intuit has a permanent display replicating Henry Darger’s room at 851 Webster Avenue in Chicago from around 1973–1974, as documented in Nathan Lerner’s photographs. It includes furniture, scrapbooks, coloring books, clippings with drawings, bundles, assorted personal items, paint pods, drawings, drawing fragments, and collages.
- Collection de l’Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland (the director, Sarah Lombardi, was absent but sent her report to the project director), which holds fifty-three artworks (accessible via a public database Muséris) and the original archives of renowned Darger scholar John MacGregor (not processed nor visible online). According to Collection de l’Art Brut, its Darger collection remains relatively unexamined by researchers, despite its richness.
- Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, Paris, France (represented by Choghakate Kazarian, curator of modern art), which holds some archival materials and forty-five artworks—collages and watercolors (flags, Blengin portraits, and double-side panoramas). It is one of the most important Darger collections outside the United States. This collection is accessible via two databases: Museum link and an interconnected database hosting the collection of all French art museums.

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Many of AFAM's primary objectives were discussed during the meeting on April 23, 2018:

1. Content available on the portal and role of collaborating partners
2. Conservation and digitization surveys, with recommendations
3. Copyright and intellectual property issues
4. Technology, technical requirements, hardware and software, metadata

The timeline proposed in the planning grant application has been slightly altered and minor changes were made to the project, none of which effected the outcomes associated with the grant. AFAM decided to hire three part-time assistants rather than an assistant project director to provide very specific project support (coordination of the Advisory Board meeting and communication with the participants, transcription of the Advisory Board meeting, researching other web platforms similar in scope and scale). This allowed us to hire highly recommended consultants for conservation assessment. Furthermore, while Deborah Wythe's participation was more limited in scope, she was able to make considerable contributions, in particular during the meeting held on April 23rd. These changes did not prevent AFAM from meeting its goal and exploring the more pressing aspects of the project.

1. Content available on the portal and role of collaborating partners

Two main options regarding the structure of portal emerged from the discussions:

a) The first option is to create a database and link it to AFAM's website (like AFAM's Library catalogue), on which people can strictly access AFAM's Darger collection (see "PROJECT ACTIVITIES," point 2). This option would be comparable in its architecture to the Edgar Allan Poe Digital Collection portal (<http://norman.hrc.utexas.edu/poedc/details.cfm?id=1>), which gathers manuscripts and letters conserved by the Ransom Center and also links to transcriptions. In this case, AFAM would use its existing Darger finding aid to help create the structure of the portal and create intellectual and categorical links between objects. Once all the materials are digitized and integrated into such a platform, the project maintenance should be of a more limited nature I.

b) The second option is more ambitious. It supports the idea to create an aggregated portal model that would become the primary, comprehensive reference on Darger for learning about his oeuvres (art, writing, source materials) and process, but also a platform to host scholarly research and engage with vast audiences internationally via different sections. With this option, the portal structure would be accomplished in multiple stages. In addition to access to AFAM's Darger collection, it would centralize additional content on Darger coming from various external sources. Keeping in mind that the goal for this portal is to be recognized as the leading resource on Darger, it would serve the following needs:

- i. The single source of all primary material on Darger: The portal would give access to primary sources on Darger from AFAM's holdings, and also those housed in different collections from around the world.
- ii. Partnerships: At first, AFAM would focus on creating a portal for its own content, while conceiving a scalable system that partner institutions could join at a later time. The portal would evolve to host collections of primary material (artworks and archives) from other institutions with

Darger-related content. Although the three museums involved in the Advisory Board cannot devote financial support for the development of the Darger Portal, they expressed the desire to provide feedback and collaborate whenever possible. AFAM intends to keep the organizations informed. Eventually, AFAM will provide its spreadsheet models for cataloguing, as well as guidelines and standards to ensure consistency in the handling of digital content and metadata by each partner. Similar to the Duchamp Research Portal, “it is presumed that each institution will manage, preserve, and provide its own content (images and metadata), which will then be aggregated online. This aggregated approach will make it possible for each institution to follow its own country’s laws regarding copyrights and intellectual property, and will avoid the many problems involved in creating and managing a single, centralized database.” As Susan Anderson proposed in PMA’s white paper, a consultant could help to develop a primary system that can be implemented. AFAM would then coordinate with the project partners in setting up technical structures, according to their specifications and available content. Similar to PMA, AFAM “will work with the participants to create a common ontology that will enable a harvester to pull data and image from the institution via an Application Program Interface (API) and the agreed-upon Resource Description Framework (RDF) specifications.”

- iii. Expand the scholarship on Darger: Provide an organic understanding of Darger’s production and demonstrate the relationship/connectivity between its different parts by permitting cross-referenced research between artworks, manuscripts, and source materials. While giving access to Darger’s primary material listed in the planning grant, it was highly suggested by the participants—especially scholars—that Darger’s visual arts (watercolors, collages, etc.) from AFAM’s collection (already on TMS Collections) and outside collections can be an intrinsic part of the portal (this process can be engaged gradually, starting with AFAM’s artworks). Art images, curatorial object files, and conservation records would benefit from being included in that portal; it would undeniably add to its value and illustrate more fully the complexity of Darger’s oeuvre.
- iv. Facilitate access to content: The density of Darger’s material complicates how it is presented (cf.: novel of 15,454 pages with repetitions, lists, idiosyncratic grammar). In order to maximize the experience, AFAM can gradually provide transcriptions of the narratives. Crowdsourcing can be a good, sustainable solution to explore. AFAM could partner with universities and their digital humanities programs to find volunteers.
- v. Interpretation and public access: While researchers will be interested in conducting in-depth research on the portal, it is important to think about ways to engage other audiences and create a polyvalent, evolving, and dynamic platform. Among the ideas suggested are sections introducing one aspect of Darger’s oeuvre, guest interviews, curricula for schools, ongoing bibliography on Darger with links to websites or downloadable PDFs of scholarly essays, exhibition history, track the artist’s workflow, scholars’ analyses, and short videos examining monumental watercolor drawings. Such companion tools would be helpful for scholars and the general public, and they would address the needs of both general curiosity and in-depth research.
- vi. Audience engagement: Capture evolving reactions about Darger via social media, which can also expand the reach and the dissemination of new research. If AFAM’s primary goal is to be considered the primary online source on Darger, social media poses nonetheless issues in terms of verification.
- vii. Use of the material: Refer to point 3 “Copyright” in the “ACCOMPLISHMENTS” section.

- viii. Priorities: The fragility of Darger’s manuscripts (see point 2 “Conservation and digitization surveys, with recommendations” in the “ACCOMPLISHMENTS” section) has forced AFAM to restrict, in part, their consultation. Digitizing this material would not only permit their online access, but it would also contribute to their preservation on a long-term basis by limiting the handling of the material. In that regard, the seven bound volumes of the *Realms of the Unreal*—which are very fragile—would be considered a priority for digitization. Microfilms have been created for most of the Darger manuscripts. They were produced in the 1990s by the Darger Estate for on-site research only and protected by copyright. Unfortunately, the content transferred with older technologies is difficult to read, often blurry, because the pages of the original documents are so thin that the text on both sides is visible through the paper. In the event Darger’s that personal archives (ephemera, collages, traced images, Darger book collection) are not all sustainable for the portal project, scholar Leisa Runquist suggested to prioritize the digitization according to the items that are more clearly part of Darger’s creative process/vision. The remaining material can be managed by the archivist, who can give access to them on request.

2. Conservation and digitization surveys, with recommendations

As determined early in the process, the conservation of selected items will be necessary prior to their digitization because of their condition. In that regard, the CCAHA staff was consulted over the course of the grant period:

- December 17, 2017: Initial consult on treatment and digital needs by director of Conservation Mary Schobert and Preservation and Imaging project coordinator Tamara Talansky.
- December 27, 2017: Book conservator Amber Hares briefly examined all of the forty-three bound volumes, devoting most of her time to the first seven volumes of the *Realms of the Unreal*. Paper conservator Tessa Gadomski looked through the unbound material.
- January 4, 2018: CCAHA sent a condition summary for the first seven volumes of the *Realms of the Unreal* (see [Appendix “CCAHA Condition summary”](#)), with observations on covers, structure, leaves, and media, proposing preliminary treatment proposal—or stabilization—before imaging. Imaging proposals and estimates for these volumes are pending until imaging tests can be conducted: “Given the extent of access and handling challenges that the volumes present due to their sheer size (i.e., thickness), sewing structure, and deteriorating bindings, imaging texts on volume IV of the *Realms of the Unreal* will be needed in order to complete the imaging proposal and estimates of the volumes. Testing will produce sample images that decision makers at AFAM can assess for usefulness.”
- January 4, 2018: CCAHA sent assessment proposals for on-site examination of bound (sample of 36 volumes) and 8,405 unbound items (see [Appendix “CCAHA Assessment proposals”](#)).
- May 7, 2018: On-site examination of thirty-six bound volumes and seventeen boxes of unbound material (including 250 folders of items from a variety of groups within the unbound collection) were surveyed. During examination, the condition of each item was briefly described and treatment proposals and housing proposals with estimates were developed. In terms of condition overview of the unbound material, the CCAHA observed that “...many of the paper documents are largely composed of poor quality paper supports which were intended to be ephemeral, and as a result are inherently brittle and acidic. The majority of the unbound materials are in fair condition, and are in need of minor conservation treatment in order to make them stable enough to handle for digitization.”

- June 2018: Delivery of item-level condition survey (various formats, abbreviated and detailed) for bound, unbound, and other source material, which also included a broad summary of the condition of the materials, along with a table listing the condition and digitization challenges of each volumes. CCAHA produced estimates for treatment and imaging costs, according to the items conservation needs and AFAM's conservation goals, to prepare the material for safe handling for digitization. CCAHA produced quotes, based on the imaging tests for the Volume IV of the *Realms of the Unreal*, and recommendations for digitization (see appendices "CCAHA Survey bound Summary A," "CCAHA Survey bound Summary B," and "CCAHA Survey unbound Summary").

The major objective in terms of treatment and housing strategy for the bound materials is to stabilize the items only to the extent necessary for handling during imaging. In terms of imaging strategy, the covers, leaves, and inserts with content would be digitally captured recto/verso using a flatbed scanner or a medium-format camera. For the unbound material, conservation treatment is also necessary to stabilize the materials for digitization and to make it available to researchers. Generally, the paper support should be surface cleaned, the folds and creases should be relaxed, the tears should be mended, and the losses bridged. In short, digitization of the collection is recommended, given the high quantity of inherently brittle and acidic paper supports. This would increase access and awareness of the collection materials and would further reduce the need for handling of the original documents. The image files would be processed out 1:1. A portable hard drive containing TIFF, JPEG, and PDF image files would be provided to AFAM. Metadata can be estimated as requested.

3. Copyright and intellectual property issues

The members of the Advisory Board discussed what image quality should be available on the Darger Portal, pointing out the importance of providing a quality that is sufficient to be read. The surface of the artworks and manuscripts are filled with details and written elements that require close viewing. Enlargement of images would make acute observations possible. A fully functional portal for scholars (and the public in general) would allow for zooming on the images in order to fully engage with the particular nature of Darger's work (reading of texts in Darger's captions, notations, numbers, and speech bubbles; observing transitions between media and practices: drawing, tracing, collage, and watercolor). All of the images currently available online and in print do not have the quality or magnification to show the range of details and nuances on Darger's work; thus, such a portal would provide a unique, fundamentally important access.

During the acquisition of its large collection of Darger's artworks and documents AFAM signed an agreement with the representative of the Darger estate (the "Estate") regulating the use of the Darger materials. AFAM wishes to mention that the Estate "shall retain any and all copyrights in and to the Collection and Archives. Notwithstanding the retention of copyright, the Estate hereby grants to the Museum the right to publish, produce or manufacture, directly or by license or other agreement, works of an educational or scholarly nature in furtherance of the intent of this agreement." This agreement solely concerns AFAM's collection, which means that opening the portal to content from other institutions would require that AFAM revisits its own agreement, but also that these institutions formalize their agreement with the representatives of the Darger estate, which would allow such uses as on an aggregated portal: each partner would manage its own assets, following its own country's laws.

In the course of the planning grant, a Darger estate representative wrote to the project director: “One of my biggest concerns over the years has been preserving the integrity of the writings, with the goal of eventual scholarly editing and publication. I previously granted the museum non-exclusive rights to permit the use of the material for educational and scholarly works, and at the time, I had not considered that every item would be published on the web without editing or context. If that is the museum’s current intent, I would request that the museum provide some minimal protections to prevent widespread unauthorized publication of the material by third parties. ... I must ask that the museum commit to making available online images of Darger writings at a low enough resolution that they cannot be reproduced in print. In addition, please display a copyright notice on each page, as well as a digital watermark identifying the museum as the source of the images. ... I would ask to review the museum’s planned approach to these issues at the appropriate time.”

In line with the Darger estate, one of AFAM’s major concerns is the security of the Darger Portal, regarding image downloads and the reproduction of images without permissions. Deborah Wythe, referring to her experience with the Duchamp Research Portal at PMA, remarked that risk assessment is critical (minimize risks through licensing and having certain policies in place, like obtaining permission from family, take-down rule, check box before download). AFAM considered several options in this regard:

- A user login with various security levels
- Lower quality images
- Images unable to be downloaded
- Using watermarks

Currently, images of the Darger paintings are available on AFAM’s website and high-resolution images for publishing are available via Art Resource, which handles AFAM’s photo requests.

An artwork has the widest possible audience and potential for research and exhibition purposes if it is in the public domain, providing a greater freedom in terms of design, logistics, and productivity for the portal manager. There is also fair use doctrine to consider and how it is being used by museum and archives to allow access to collections (see legal guidelines for archival projects in the College Art Association report on fair use). At the April 23, 2018 meeting, Mrs. Wythe reported that “The National Gallery is now fully open access. The Brooklyn Museum used open access somewhat, providing fairly good screen size image, and its website tells you what the rights are—they are transparent about what people can do with images.” Greater access allows research through IIIF (International Image Interoperability Framework) “a set of shared application programming interface (API) specifications for interoperable functionality in digital image repositories.” This gives scholars “a rich set of baseline functionality for viewing, zooming, and assembling the best mix of resources and tools to view, compare, manipulate, and work with images on the Web, an experience made portable—shareable, citable, and embeddable.” This creates a richer educational and scholarly tool.

At present, scholars and museums must pay fees to Artists Rights Society (ARS) for use; however, due to the availability online, certain images are sometimes freely downloaded by the general public and put on Instagram, websites, and blogs despite being under copyright. As such, it is realized that even though a portal could make its images impossible to download, people would find a way to obtain them (for example, screenshots). Mrs. Wythe gave the example of the “Google Art Project, which scrapped that idea and decided to add to Wikipedia—people feel good about it being in the public domain. Once it’s out there, it’s out there.”

In an effort to create better access to the Darger materials, AFAM will continue an active conversation with the Darger estate regarding copyright, exposing clear alternatives with their affiliated pros and cons. Her presence is crucial in the decision-making process regarding this ambitious portal that aims to increase access to Darger and generate scholarship.

4. Technology, technical requirements, hardware and software, metadata

Currently, AFAM uses MediaStudio as its DAMS (digital asset management system). MediaStudio is a Gallery Systems product that links directly with The Museum System (TMS Collections), AFAM's collection management system. In turn, TMS Collections powers AFAM's collection website using eMuseum. Images are currently stored on a combination of Dropbox, portable hard drives, and the remote server that stores and runs TMS Collections.

There are number of challenges with this current model. First, a better image storage system needs to be implemented. This is currently being discussed and a cloud-based system using Amazon S3 and Glacier is being examined. Second, in terms of the Darger Portal, because much of AFAM's Darger material is processed through archival best practices, they are processed at the "folder level" as archives, and not as collection objects aid. (All Darger artworks are cataloged at the "item level.") Additionally, the archival collection is in a completely different database. Both of these factors make it difficult to smoothly integrate with TMS Collections. In order to integrate the archives, AFAM would have to create a new cataloging method or process the collection to an item level. With this restriction, it makes it difficult to use eMuseum to integrate archival records on AFAM's website. As such, AFAM's current website is not suitable for its future Darger Portal because it does not communicate that AFAM has related materials on the artist. Likewise, the Finding Aid does not contain images or link back to the collection page. In order to display the museum's archival collection, AFAM must figure out how to integrate both pages. As such, creating a portal that would showcase just AFAM's collection, as in the first option discussed, would still require extensive backend work and the need to create a website from the ground up.

During this process, it was agreed that the relationship between Darger's visual art (panoramas, portraits, etc.), manuscripts, and source material be linked within the portal in order to highlight their connections and expand the ongoing scholarship on the artist. Once AFAM has a system for uploading to the database, AFAM could add this content to the portal as it is digitized and the metadata created.

Additional questions arose about the technical aspects of the portal. Should it be a micro-site on AFAM's website or its own platform completely? What is the most appropriate method of integrating data to the portal according to AFAM's current collections management system, online library catalog, and archival finding aids? Can the Darger Finding Aid be used as a framework upon which to build? What are the web hosting options and databases that AFAM can use to power the portal? What kind of sustainable system architecture will support growth? Will AFAM be crowdsourcing the transcriptions? Could AFAM use software such as Scripto or FromThePage? Will AFAM use OCR to provide incomplete transcripts of the manuscripts? Will this be viable on handwritten pages? How will the portal be discoverable beyond AFAM?

Options and opinions were examined. For example, whereas having the portal as a micro-site on AFAM's website might make it more easily discoverable, having it as its own platform would create a greater sense of a collaborative project if AFAM were to open up the portal to other institutions to contribute.

In terms of web hosting and databases, AFAM reviewed a few options, including ContentDM, but later decided that some of this should be discussed with a web designer in order to allow greater feedback and fewer problems as the portal is being built. AFAM has not met with web designers for feedback because it was premature to identify possible systems for the Darger Portal at the moment.

Cataloging and metadata standards: In order to disseminate and share the content of the Darger project, ensuring that the Darger Portal conforms to international metadata and digitization standards is crucial. Metadata entry can take ten or more times longer to complete than digitization, but it allows for a better discovery and makes the digital object more useful (create social networks, geospatial uses, image analysis, manipulation). Currently, AFAM would be looking at using Dublin Core as its standard as the current Darger finding aid (hosted on Archive Space), and digital assets can be exported to that standard. However, with the addition of partner institutions from not only the United States but also in Europe, there will need to be an examination of which standard each institution uses and an agreement regarding what standard the portal will follow. Additionally, a decision regarding a controlled vocabulary for Darger's works will have to be made. Once these decisions and surveys are made, it will allow for a more seamless integration of different institution collections into the Darger Portal, as well as giving a framework for any future additions into the portal.

AUDIENCES

AFAM has more than 200,000 unique visitors to its website each year. “Darger” is the second most popular Google search term that brings people to AFAM’s website (“American Folk Art Museum” is the most popular term). On the website, 8% of all searches are on Darger. This is the largest single category of searches. AFAM’s average “page per session” is 2.6, but people who searched for Darger had an average “page per session” of 6.8, which means that people who look for Darger on AFAM’s website look longer and at more materials. Their bounce rate is lower, and they include more returning visitors. Darger drives more people to AFAM’s website than any other artist, exhibition, or genre. People who are looking for Darger on the website are significantly more engaged than the average visitor and are more likely to come back to AFAM’s website to view more Darger information.

When searched on Google, Darger makes 362,000 results, a little behind Jackson Pollock (477,000 results) and about half of the searches of Marcel Duchamp (865,000 results). Such numbers are impressive, knowing that his discovery and recognition in the art history canon are relatively recent, and his reputation is on the ascent (still disproportionately low in comparison to the other artists mentioned). The interest for Darger’s oeuvre has been exponential and unprecedented, reaching out to very diverse audiences beyond the field of visual arts professionals (similar to AFAM’s exhibitions’ various publics). General public from all ages, curators, reputable collectors, younger generations of professional artists, and scholars from different horizons—literature, music, gender studies, poetry—are all drawn to Darger, whose oeuvre intrinsically speaks to different levels of expertise, sensibilities, and life experiences. The Darger Portal would serve and cultivate these different audiences. It is anticipated, however, that the most frequent users of the Darger Portal (probably 60%, based on the Duchamp Research Portal survey) would be museum professionals, university faculty and students, and independent scholars. Aware of the international interest for Darger (collections, art events like biennials, etc.) and the different partners involved, it is likely that this platform will be used far beyond the United States (e.g., in France, United Kingdom, Australia, Brazil, etc.). In this regard, AFAM wishes for its discoverability to go beyond AFAM’s website, and participate to its inclusion in aggregated online library catalogs. As noted in the Duchamp Research Portal white paper, “broad sharing of content such as DPLA and Europeana, for increased discoverability. The technical design will be developed with these models in mind, so that broad sharing of content will be possible, especially in their use of harvester and API protocols.”

AFAM wishes to share publicly the current development leading to the Darger Portal. In addition to sending its white paper to the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which makes it available online, AFAM will share it on its website. AFAM will inform its members (2,500) via the printed annual report and share content in its monthly eNewsletters (25,000 subscribers) and on social media (77,000 followers). Michael Bonesteel and Valérie Rousseau presented preliminary considerations regarding scholarly content for the Darger Portal during a “Darger Day” celebration at the museum on April 12, 2018—a program that attracted more than 800 visitors.

EVALUATION

From AFAM's own assessment, this project raised the profile of the museum and its archives—from internal assessment to outside awareness. It helped AFAM to affirm a relatively new mission toward archival work at the museum (Mimi Lester was the first archivist in the museum's history), and to send a clear signal of AFAM's commitment to gather documentation from self-taught artists. The project promoted AFAM's holdings in a larger museum network, initiated constructive conversations with its peers, and strengthened national and international relationships with collectors, museums, and organizations that have Darger holdings. Members of the Advisory Board shared their reflections after the April 23, 2018 meeting, which contributed to the creation of the present report. Despite the museum's scale (small museum, budget of \$3-4 million a year, staff of 22 employees), AFAM was able to sustain its commitment to this important project. Because of this project, AFAM now has a blueprint for next steps towards implementation.

CONTINUATION OF PROJECT

As the primary architect of this portal, AFAM is committed to pursuing the development of the project on various fronts:

1. Creating a sustainable and scalable technological infrastructure

- Develop guidelines and workflows with potential institutional partners, which would allow them to prepare digital content and metadata.
- Consult with partners on how to set up the technical infrastructure on their end to allow for harvesting.
- Assume responsibility for troubleshooting and recruiting new partners to the project.
- Seek regular maintenance, preservation, and upgrades of the database.

2. Nurture AFAM's relationship with the Darger Estate

- Continue to share with the Estate what has been conceptualized and discussed with different consultants.
- Define clear plans for the future, underlining all involvements anticipated.

3. Maintenance plan at AFAM

The success of such a project lies in its sustainability and ability to nurture dynamism and anticipate expansion. During the planning process, AFAM came to realize that full-time project manager to coordinate the portal project would be necessary to ensure the success of the project. Because of AFAM's small staff size, it would be critical to have a staff member provide regular, stable support, and focus on moving the project forward. This person would develop a maintenance plan to ensure the portal would be up to date,, address digital preservation, maintain the server, generate updates, add new content, and communicate with partners and audiences. This task would be shared with the current project director, who would also contribute a percentage of her position to this project in the years to come. Because of the nature of the collection, which involves archival documents and artworks, it is important to maintain both an archival and curatorial presence in the project direction. Having a conservator on staff during the digitization process is recommended.

4. Current and prospective partnerships

- Work on needs and goals with the main institutional partners.
- Reach out to other museums and private collections with major holdings of Henry Darger.
- Reach out to other institutions referencing to Henry Darger holdings.

5. Structuring the project for an NEH implementation grant

- Identify main models and systems.
- Process by priorities, in terms of what will be conserved and digitized.
- Hire consultants for specific guidance and expertise.
- Provide relevant staff training.

6. Financial structure

- AFAM has been cultivating both private and foundation support for the Darger Portal. During the next phase of development, AFAM will begin approaching funding sources for additional support to implement the project.
- Secure a commitment from AFAM's leadership to carry the project forward, asking them to provide support for staffing the portal and building this expense into the operating budget as a permanent part of the archives and curatorial programs. This support is fundamental to pursue grant funding, as such support implies maximum results over time.
- Generate additional funding, including philanthropic support.
- Create an endowment for the project.

LONG-TERM IMPACT

AFAM is deeply grateful to the NEH in supporting the planning phase for the Darger Portal. This project constitutes a driving force for the museum, as it helps to increase and cultivate a large community interested in the oeuvre of one of the primary artists from its collection. This project will have a decisive impact on additional donations as such to the museum. It is proof of AFAM's commitment to develop a substantial online, public archive of a significant self-taught artist, and its leadership in acquiring primary and secondary sources on artists in the field—a niche that AFAM is a leader in developing. The Darger Portal would be the first example in the field of self-taught art. It has the potential to become a driving force and a reference for similar initiatives.

This project carries a larger message at a time when audiences are pursuing extensive researches and initiatives online. These materials prove to be invaluable to understand an entire aspect of artistic creation that has been excluded or marginalized from the traditional art historical narrative. AFAM believes that giving access to its Darger collection will not only nurture further scholarship and create more dialogue around Darger, but it will reinforce AFAM's primary goal, which is to give a platform to the "voiceless" and allow this material to formatively engage in twenty-first century art and the social and cultural dialogue around it. In short, the preservation and presentation of AFAM's Darger collection (and its extension with a scalable portal that would welcome additional resources) will have a significant impact on the understanding of a complex and enigmatic artist whose work intersects many humanities themes.

GRANT PRODUCTS

A number of products resulted from this NEH planning grant. AFAM held a one-day conference focusing on the Darger Portal and hosted scholars, archivists, curators, and museum specialists. The conference, held on April 23, 2018, yielded more than half a dozen presentations and reports, and a recording of the proceedings was also created. In addition, a white paper was produced, which will be available for consultation by other institutions exploring the possibilities of developing an online portal. As the field becomes increasingly focused on greater access to cultural and art historical material, the importance of sharing best practices and lessons learned becomes even greater. The results of this planning grant will be made available through the museum, and the white paper will be posted on its website and shared with the NEH.

LIST OF APPENDICES

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